Whither Christian Mission Between and Beyond the Two Koreas?
A Sacramental Reading of the Missional Narratives in Mark

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Introduction

For Christian mission, the Bible was and is an invaluable textbook. Particularly, the New Testament provides criteria and core themes for mission and encourages many Christian evangelists, Catholics and Protestants, to travel fearlessly across cultures (e.g. Matt. 28:18-19). Mission is not only "religious," however, but also includes a "synthesis of self and other" through the making of connections and relations among the indigenous and the travelers. Religious synthesis of this sort has had significant bearing on the way early Christianity unfolded its social awareness, as it should in the contemporary Christian mission between and beyond the two Koreas.

During the recent debate of the mission from the South to the North Korea, "missionize" often becomes a synonym for "liberate" or "democratize," bringing about a specific political effect either implicitly or explicitly. Since a ceasefire between the two Koreas was declared without an ensuing peace accord, the war has thus far been both physically and psychologically prolonged for more than fifty years.[2] For Koreans being deprived of opportunity to return to their own homeland, the estrangement and exclusion in exile has had consequences involving contradictions, gaps and silences. In his famous poem, *Letter to the Tuman River*, Ko Un expresses metaphorically his resentment of the anonymous suffering of the Korean Diaspora:

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[2] Technically, the war has never ended. An armistice was signed on July 27, 1953, but there has been no peace treaty.

> My sister dear, one hundred times dear, ever dear sister, suppose that you die up there one day and I down here? But that's our people's life, age after age, that kind of hidden, nameless death.[3]

Such a common experience between North and South shows the reality of a diasporic context and forms the arbitrary ordeal through which two Koreas survive. This essay foregrounds the presence of the Korean Diaspora and evaluates as well as analyzes how a view of the missional text in the Gospels relates to the particular Korean diasporic context. For the overall project, I ground myself as a real reader, immersed in a specific historical, cultural, social, and geo-political location.

From such a location, I will read "across" the missional text and its readings, analyzing how each construction stands with regard to the "People of God" living in the "world" in which they are estranged from each other.[4] These critical reflections will form the basis for debating with the text in the presence of drastic social, economic, cultural formations and discourses between and around the two Koreas. As a critical tool, such reflexive approach will help us open to constant questioning and continual revisioning with regard to the world behind, within, and in front of the text.

At the dawning period of Christian missions in the then-one-united native Korea, the model of mission that dominated the scenes was the mission as "proclamation and witness to save souls." This model of mission is historically related to the late 19th and early 20th century's revival movement in Western—mostly American—missionary countries. The agency in this mission is encouraged to cross the borders and proclaim, through words and deeds, the Good News of God's salvation to the heathens, converting them to the Christian religion (cf. Matthew 28:19-20, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations…teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."). Hence, most discussions about the missional text have been concerned with its

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[3] Ko Un, *The Sound of My Waves: Selected Poems by Ko Un*. Trans. by Brother Anthony Kim (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), 29.

[4] This undertaking inserts the voice of the real reader and brings to critical understanding her/his own interests and perspectives. Such a comparative and dialogical practice helps biblical criticism cease to be "a matter of recuperation and exhibition" and to become "a matter of ethics and politics." Fernando F. Segovia, *Interpreting beyond Borders*. The Bible and Postcolonialism 3 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 67.

theological significance, how it relates to the salvation history and what it represents in terms of the grand narrative of western Christianity.

Since the modern mission era, however, while not denying the necessity of witness, proclamation, and baptism, there emerged another model of mission that arose from within native Korea. This model of mission was grounded on the view that salvation (soteriological and beyond) has to be understood as comprising the social, political, economic, and cosmic dimensions of human existence. Mission as such grew out of the struggles of Christians who embrace their own history as well as the universal message of the Bible. This mode of mission attempted to read anew the missional texts in the Gospels. For instance, Jesus's mission statement in the Gospel of Luke 4:18-19 drew considerable attention, which involves preaching the Good News to the poor, releasing the captives, giving sight to the blind, letting the oppressed free, and proclaiming the favorable year of the Lord. This particular mode of mission brought into play a profound reflection on mission as an occasion for holistic sacrament through which believers encounter God as a mystery in all the multiple dimensions of human life—that is, social, political, economic, and cultural—and through which they are inspired as the authors of the Bible were inspired.

With this introduction, I now turn to several quotations from the Korea mission reports of the early American missionaries in the late 19th century.

Mission in Korea

In *Korea: The Land People and Customs* (1907), George H. Jones, the President of the Biblical Institute of Korea, prefaced his work by saying that he intends "to show the conditions amidst which missionaries labor, by briefly describing the land, people, customs, and religious life of the Koreans".[5] With regard to gods in Korea, Jones further notes:

> There are more gods than people in Korea. The name of these spirits is legion. To the Korean mind they exist everywhere, in earth, in sky and sea...They abound, making sport of human destiny and driving man mad with fear.[6]

[5] George H. Jones, *Korea: The Land, People, and Customs* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1907), 52.
[6] *Ibid*., 59.

The evil spirits never stop abusing the destiny of a Korean:

> They touch him at every point of his life, preside at his birth, follow him to the grave, and dance on it when he is buried…The very willingness of the Koreans to offer a costly service to pagan gods, becomes transformed into a free, unreserved, full-hearted love to God and service to their fellow-men.[7]

Jones's description of the spirits "driving man mad with fear" stands close to the view of the L.H. Underwood, who states in 1904 that "It must be acknowledged that all three of the Korean faiths, or better, superstitions or philosophies have accomplished very little in giving any real moral tone to the nation".[8] Those non-Christian religions were described as idolatry and superstition or at least as powerless human attempts at self-salvation. Hence, A. W. Wasson states in his mission report that:

> Christianity had entered Korea along with a great caravan of culture traits from the West…The purpose of the missionary is to bring about changes, those changes in the attitudes and institutions of a people which are necessary to that progressive enrichment of life which is commonly called the coming of the Kingdom of God.[9]

In the contemporary context, such a point of view of evangelism mission has directed to the North, aiming to advance more ethical, social, cultural, and political changes in the North.

The story of the sea-crossing in the Gospel of Mark proves highly suggestive in this regard. This Markan passage consists of two episodes (Mark 4:35-41; 5:1-20). The first recounts a nature miracle involving the interaction of Jesus and the disciples, and the second relates to Jesus' mission as discovering distant lands and civilizing the native. The first story is relatively brief; yet its dramatic emphasis sheds a light on the next story of the Gerasene Maniac.

Before traveling to the other side of Galilee, Jesus first invites his disciples to accompany him to cross the sea. When the storm arises, Jesus remains unconcerned and asleep, and the terrified disciples scream at their master, "Teacher, do you not

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[7] *Ibid*., 64.
[8] L. H. Underwood, *Fifteen Years among the Top-Knots* (Boston: American Tract Society, 1904), 95.
[9] A. W. Wasson, *Church Growth in Korea* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Libraries, 1931), 50.

care that we are perishing?" (Mark 4:38). At that moment, Jesus wakes and stills the storm, reproving their lack of faith (Mark 4:39).[10]

Like the unclean spirit (Mark 1:25), the wind is rebuked and silenced, and the waters listen to Jesus. In this regard, either fear or faith remains the only alternative for response.[11] If the storm represents the cosmic force of chaos and destruction imbedded in the passage, the sea serves as a site of struggle to integrate two different worlds.[12] This sea story dramatizes the difficult, yet worthwhile passage from the southern "Jewish" to the northern "gentile" side. The quelling of chaotic nature does not only imply Jesus' divine power, but also facilitates his unlimited access to all the geographical spaces of the world.[13]

A journey of this sort often brings in military companionship. In another mission report by L.H. Underwood, *Fifteen Years among the Top-Knots* (1904), he states:

> Thus should we march through the land like conquerors, instilling awe and terror in all hearts, and none who looked on this tableau would ever again dare assail a foreigner. Now this was of course exactly the impression that we wished to produce as missionaries! We pictured ourselves going about preaching the cross, with such an object lesson as this, trying to win the hearts of the people, while driving their compatriots before us in chains, and we enjoyed that vision hugely. It would hardly have been possible to have obtained the relief of our Koreans without the arrest of the criminals, several of whom were identified as notorious men, whose seizure was necessary to the peace and safety of the community.[14]

Interestingly, upon arrival on the gentile land, Mark's Jesus also encounters a man possessed by the legion of evils:

> And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and

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[10] Mary A. Tolbert notes that here "Jesus presents the two basic alternatives for human response, fear or faith." Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 166.
[11] Cf. Mark 5:36, "…Do not fear, only believe."
[12] E. S. Malbon notes that Mark "presupposes the connotation of the sea as chaos, threat, danger … from the Hebrew scriptures." *Narrative space and mythic meaning in Mark* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 97.
[13] E. S. Malbon notes that Mark "presupposes the connotation of the sea as chaos, threat, danger … from the Hebrew scriptures." *Narrative space and mythic meaning in Mark*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 97.
[14] *Ibid*., 95.

> chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. (Mark 5:2-5).

By this possessed man, Jesus' authority is immediately recognized: Jesus is the "Son of the Most High God" (5:7). The emphasis is laid, however, on Jesus' power to domesticate and control supernatural spirits. Undoubtedly, the character of a maniac makes more striking the mode of subordination and domestication. The legion of spirits that holds the maniac begs Jesus (5:10), and so do the natives tending the pigs (5:18). It is striking that the name of the demon is legion which signifies a division of soldiers of the Empire. The legion, which represents enemy soldiers, is swallowed up by the water in Jesus' power. Jesus "dismissed them" by the command (5:13).

Hence, Jesus is shown as the traveler *par excellence*. His superiority is well expressed in a specific literary style in the Gospel of Mark that was used for his identification as "Son of the Most High God" (5:7). While the disciples are rhetorically obscured in the narrative, they nevertheless travel with Jesus. As long as they travel with Jesus, their authority will be secure since authority remains the substance of the mission (cf. 3:14-16).

For the Gerasene indigenous, the drowning of a herd of pigs represents an inescapable passage to integration. While this mission becomes an intense, costly contact the story of the Syrophoenician woman in the Gospel of Mark emerges as most peculiar with its discursive use of gender, place, identity (Mark 7:24-30).[15]

A Sacramental Reading of Missional Narrative

The story of the Syrophoenician woman represents a quite different type of integration in between, while it also bears the ethnic and socio-political hostility between Jews and Gentiles.

When Jesus goes away to the region of Tyre and enters a house, a woman whose little daughter has an unclean spirit immediately hears about Jesus. She comes

[15] cf. Matt. 7:6; "Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you."

and falls down at Jesus' feet, begging him to heal her daughter (Mark 7:25; cf. 5:22f.). Surprisingly, however, Jesus likens her to a dog: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (7:27).

This woman was a Gentile of Syrophoenician origin. The animal metaphor was designed to convey her state of estrangement from the Jews at large and the Jewish Healer in particular and hints at that she might not even be a legitimate recipient in the mission. She takes, however, the metaphor of exclusion and turns it back over and against the gaps and contradictions in between: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (7:28). Then, finally, Jesus grants her request, and her daughter becomes well: "He said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone" (7:29-30).

Under the table where even the dogs eat from the children's crumbs, the woman fully reinstates her own agency. She grounds herself in the *sacrament*, a communion between and beyond the Jews and Gentiles. By way of participating in the table, she not only ascertains, but also fully consumes the word of Jesus—which is a true experience of mission that one enters and in which one is moved by the Good News in the deepest part of her or his own existence. This holistic, sacramental experience presents how missions between the two Koreas have to be unfolded.

Probably, another example of this sacramental mission can be found in the Parable of the Prodigal Son in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 15:11-32). After the return of the younger brother, the older son raises a sharp critique toward his father and denies entering the banquet: "For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat…But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" (15:29-30).

However, the father takes him back to the banquet in a most consoling and consistent manner: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (15:31-32). Following the father's holistic and sacramental vision and thus participating in the table, both the "prodigal" and the

"disciplined" may enter a true experience of mission. This holistic, sacramental experience serves as the ground for the missions between and beyond the two Koreas, as long as it promotes Eucharistic union and reconciliation in between, and sharing and diaconal service beyond, for the life of the whole world.

This mission should not be divided or discriminatory. It should go far beyond exclusive motivations of the subject-object relations. The point is not to proclaim a good system of morality and discipline in both Koreas, but rather to recognize the mission of God specifically as a mission of communion that fosters a mutual, 'heteronomous' unity, such as 'hugging' and 'kissing' with the 'prodigal,' rather than an interested and 'ideological' relations (Luke 15:20).

Conclusion

Given the catastrophic experience of the Korea War and its unending battles, one should see to it that Christian mission does not become another war between 'Self' and 'Other'. Mission as intercultural encounter does not really exempt the scriptures from such violence. Indeed, when mission sees the indigenous only as the object of the mission, it only fails to create the relationships of equals, never making a connection of faithfulness or realizing grace in between.

While the tensions grow in between 'Self' and 'Other', the Bible provides a venue for mission through which both Jews and Gentiles, and the 'Prodigal' North and 'Disciplined' South, participate in the open table, a sacrament of holy communion, and share a true experience of the Kingdom of God. Around the table, people who may find every reason not to be together are invited to share their diversity and unity and complete their satisfaction to the fullest in Christ (Eph 3:13, "Until all of us come to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ").

This holistic, sacramental vision shows how missions can be accomplished beyond the walls in between. By engaging the sacrament in such a missional way, people may find the reality of the Kingdom and the end of the war against the "axis of

evil" in their midst.[16] Indeed, this mission will certainly be a threat to demons in the present world who wield enormous self-serving power over people. It is here, by the Lord's invitation, that: "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6).

As "the child grew and became strong in spirit" (Luke 1:80), the believers need to be deeply connected to, and grow out of these convictions and visions of the beyond. Since the experience as such cannot be transmitted directly—because it is not an idea or doctrine that one can understand—one only experiences it in a true experience of holy communion with the Others. It is, then, a relocation into the imaginative landscape of God's Kingdom that allows the believers to 'see' and 'hear' "salvation"—indeed, 'see' (2:30, "My eyes have seen your salvation") and 'hear' (4:21, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing").

This salvation shall no longer sound like a special language for the saints, since the Kingdom of God is the greatest 'realism,' with its emphasis on the intuitive appreciation of the Others as a way to sane heavenly belief and practice (11:2, "Your Kingdom come!")—a concrete, real, efficacious, bodily contest and engagement, as we listen:

> Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them (Luke 7:22).

I have explored how the sacramental interpretation of missional text might reorient the debates on mission between and beyond the two Koreas. From an East Asian global perspective, I have shown two different types of mission, each related to the missional narrative in the Gospel of Mark. Since the mission is not only "religious," but also political, economic, and cultural by way of synthesis of self and other, it is imperative to evaluate as well as analyze how a view of the missional text relates to the believers' particular geopolitical context.

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[16] The "axis of evil" is a term used to describe the countries Iraq, Iran and North Korea. The phrase was introduced by President George W. Bush in his 29 January 2002 State of the Union address. The three countries were grouped as threats to the United States capable of terrorism and nuclear attack.

Hence, I have read the text from an East Asian global perspective and thereby discussed the ways in which a missional discourse transforms power and representation and promotes the vision of life, a living reality, in this world—embodied or embedded in a new relationship between and beyond. This mission is not static, but is always changing, subject to reconstitution, or better transformation, because it is the outcome of future hopes and visions in the midst of present struggles and contests. It also conveys a challenge to transgress the boundaries charged with divisions of center and periphery, metropolis and the margins.[17]

This mission inevitably becomes a comparative and dialogical practice, resists the drive toward stereotypical homogenenization and abandons hierarchical biases and privileges. Such a mission can never take place beyond perspective and contextualization, nor miss the vision of the beyond, the Kingdom of God.

[17] In this regard, see Fernando Segovia's helpful questions for the Bible readers today: "How do the margins look at the world—a world dominated by Empire—and fashion life in such a world? How does the center regard and treat the margins in the lights of its own view of the 'world' and life in that world? What images and representations of the other-world arise from either side? How is history conceived and constructed by both sides? How is 'the other' regarded and represented?" F.F. Segovia, "Biblical Criticism," 57, 171. This kind of multi-layered questioning and investigating helps us to see alternative constructions that challenge our own convictions. Then, we can allow the economic myths of Luke's day to confront the systematic constructs of today's free market economy.

Abstract

In the current debate for the Christian mission from the South to the North Korea, the term, “missionize” becomes inevitably tied to the expressions such as “liberate” or “democratize.” One of the main features of the missional project is an effort to implicitly or explicitly bring such a political effect to one of the world's most segregated nations, The Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Since a ceasefire between the two Koreas was declared in 1953 without a peace accord, the war has never ended. An armistice was signed on July 27, 1953, but there has been no peace treaty. Koreans have since been deprived of an opportunity to return to their own homeland, the one Korea. Based on this Korean experience and the reality of the marginal, this paper foregrounds the voice of a diaspora and evaluates as well as analyzes in dialogue how a view of the missional narratives in Mark relates to the particular Korean mission and reconciliation.

Key Words
Missional Narrative, North Korea, Mission, Missionary

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